

World Literature: A Critical Outlook

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Anita Desai's Hugo Baumgartner- the True
"Wandering Jew"

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You shall be as you have been thus far/As the cursed
Jews are, there! . . . Who have not a country, but live on
the road . . . Behold the Jews, who do not have a country
and are strangers everywhere and on the road at all times.

- Ion Budai Deleanu, Tiganiada, The Gypsies.

Antisemitism is without doubt the longest running and most irrational hatred in the history of mankind and the Jews, the most persecuted, hated and dispersed race in the whole world. Down the ages, based on various misconceptions, the Jews have been hated, persecuted and scattered. The term 'Diaspora' which is now used and implied for people settled in countries other than theirs, originally had its origin in the dispersion of the Jewish people among the gentiles. The term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb 'diaspeirô', meaning 'I scatter', 'I spread about' and refers to the dispersion of a people, particularly the Jews, from their homeland. In the Biblical "Psalm 137", the Jewish people in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, lament thus:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
When we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps,
For there our captors asked us for a song . . .
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
While in a foreign land? (1-4)

This pain of the Jews who were captives in Babylon can be considered as one of the earliest recordings of diasporic predicaments that are widely expressed today. Though the brutalities against the Jews precipitated in Europe around the first half of the twentieth century and culminated in the annihilation of six million European Jewry under the schematised extermination by Hitler, antisemitism neither started with Hitler nor did it end with him. The Jews were hated by the world owing to the fact that they were singular in many aspects. To begin with, they were followers of Judaism, a monotheistic religion in a pagan world and this made other suspicious of them. They were groundlessly accused of poisoning wells, blood libels, starting wars and were accused of greed, materialism and malice.

After the crucifixion of Christ, Jews were additionally castigated as 'Christ-killers', the world conveniently forgetting the fact that Jesus was a Jew himself. Hitler's Nazi antisemitism was based on the ideology of race and ethnic cleansing inspired by the theory of Darwin. Whatever was the given reason, the fact remains that the Jews have been scattered all over the world, living without a homeland-with all the accompanying dangers and apprehensions. The sense of homelessness, fear of discrimination and persecution and exile and loss of the sense of belonging have been their lot and these qualify the Jews as Fourth world people.

From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries the Jews of Europe were driven from their homelands. In 1290, they were expelled from England, between 1306 and 1394 from France, in 1400 from Prague, between 1420 and 1493 from Austria and later from countries like Spain, Portugal, Provence and so forth. These expelled and wandering Jews inspired legends like that of the "Wandering Jew", cursed by fate to find no place or rest. The condition of the "Wandering Jew" oppressed, wandering, homeless, exiled from his country and without right is perceived to be analogous with that of all the homeless Jews like Desai's

Baumgartner. Poet Octavian Goga in "Inventing the Jew" had summed up the condition of exile as thus:

I am a man deprived of homeland,
A speck of fire swept by a breeze,
A slave loos'd from his clasping strand,
The poorest that ever breathed...
I among you my burden carry,
In dirt befouled and in laughter scorned,
For woe to him bereft of country
That begs that his home be returned. (333)

Based on a real-life story, Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a tale that depicts the utter precariousness of exile. The story recounts the life of Baumgartner- a wandering Jew who tries to escape the clutches of Nazis and ends up in India. He finds himself a stranger everywhere: someone too dark for Nazi Germany and too fair for India. "In Germany he had been dark- his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair and that marked him the firangi. In both lands, unacceptable" (23). The story shuttles between past and present, Berlin and India. As T. S. Eliot's *East Coker* epigram suggests 'in the beginning is my end', the novel begins with the murder of Baumgartner in his Bombay apartment and flashes back to Second World War Berlin and ends again in India. After a lifetime of exile, Baumgartner becomes victim of what he has been running away from all his life.

Desai vividly portrays Hugo Baumgartner's childhood in Berlin, opulence with which he grows, the tightening of the anti-Semitic net, the Kristallnacht, his father's arrest and suicide and Baumgartner's eventual exile to India. The story takes us through Berlin, Venice, Calcutta and the internment camp at the foothills of Himalayas, Bombay and interiors of India - all the places Baumgartner had travelled but never belonged. All through the novel, the readers find Baumgartner drifting around not able to fit

in anywhere. He does not belong in Berlin, where he grows up. Life becomes increasingly complex and hazardous for the family with the rise of Nazi power. Hugo's father, who owns a furniture showroom and proudly walked the streets with an ivory-knobbed cane, "his head held high, his hat gleaming like the wing of an airborne beetle," (26) ends up in Dachau concentration camp, from which he returns 'a fortnight later,' shivering and with nothing to say. After the father's suicide, Hugo and his mother dwindle to a very poor existence and Hugo is forced to take up a job in India. Refusing to accompany him to the strange land his Mutti says back to eventually end her life in a Nazi death camp. Hugo's spending a week at Venice on transit does not offer him any comfort as well.

About Baumgartner in India, Desai says,

He had lived in this land for fifty years- or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference . . . Yet the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: Firangi, foreigner. (22)

The people around him avoid any contact with him and he suffers the fate of not only being an exile but also an untouchable.

Their faces sneered 'firangi, foreigner', however good-naturedly, however lacking in malice. Still the word, the name struck coldly and he winced, hunching his shoulders and trying to avoid the contact he knew they hated because contact contaminated. (23)

Desai sums up Hugo Baumgartner's life in one sentence: "Accepting-but not accepted: that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all" (23). He does not belong to the detention camp for Germans that the Indians keep him for six years when the war between the Allied and the Axis power starts. As the war intensifies, the internment camp proves to be a microcosm of Germany itself fostering hostility between highly-efficient Pro-Nazi Germans and the frightened Jews. On the

parade-ground, it was not enough that the German's had to stand in a line and sing 'Deutschland, Deutsch-land uber alles' but they also fly the German flag, raise their right arm and say, 'Heil Hitler!' while the Jews watch in fear and silence.

After the war, Baumgartner finds that he doesn't belong in Calcutta or Bombay either. About his life in Bombay Desai says, "The life of Bombay which had been Baumgartner's life for thirty years now-or, rather, the setting for his life; he never actually entered it" (251). Though he tries his hand in business and gambling, finally he loses interest in everything and lives a degraded life that revolves around his sick and maimed stray cats. Farrokh, the owner of Café de Paris in the neighbourhood fills his bag for him with the remains of the food cooked the night before and one night he forces a German Aryan drug-addict on Hugo Baumgartner's care and Kurt, the depraved youth, in return to his kindness murders Hugo for his few silver trophies. The meeting of Baumgartner and his nemesis, Kurt, is described by Desai in a heart-chilling way:

That fair hair, that peeled flesh it was a certain type that Baumgartner had escaped, forgotten. Then why had this boy to come after him, in edershosen, in marching boots striding over the mountains to the sound of the *Wander vogels Lied? The Lieder* and the campfire. The campfire and the beer. The beer and the yodelling. The yodelling and the marching. The marching and the shooting. The shooting and the killing. The killing and the killing and the killing. (25)

Anita Desai, the daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother has deftly incorporated a whole series of German songs into the text adding to the poignant effect. Her *Baumgartner's Bombay* proves itself to be the perfect diaspora story of the wandering Jew who never belonged anywhere. Through the event where Hugo goes exploring a cave temple, Desai portrays how spat out by the society, Hugo is refused acceptance even by native Gods.

Hugo, all his life tries to run away from Nazi hatred and ends up becoming a victim of the Holocaust only forty years later. Through the meaningless killing of Hugo by Kurt, Desai also implies the meaninglessness and madness of the Nazi extermination of six million Jews during the Holocaust. Along with Hugo, we also come across other mixed-race characters like Lotte, Gisela and Julius who never belonged anywhere. Spewed out of their own nation, they live their lives with a longing of returning to their homeland and acquire again a sense of belonging. Their longing remains till the end as they neither could return to their homeland nor could they fit in where they lived.

Julius and Gisela try hard to fit in and they try changing their names to Julian and Gala Van Roth. Julius is always immaculately dressed unlike the unkempt Hugo and Gisela tries to be a lady unlike Lotte but even then, they remain feeling alienated too. The novel hints that being religious or agnostic, neatly dressed or staying shabby, being tarty or lady-like doesn't make a difference in an exile's life and a refugee will forever remain one. Desai says of Hugo, "Like a mournful turtle . . . he carried everything with him; perhaps it was the only way he knew to remain himself" (29). Till the very end Hugo Baumgartner's homelessness remains making his mother's heart, probably the only home he has ever had.

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